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ABSTRACT

The linguistic atlas projects have provided much information on the regional distribution of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax and have given important evidence for a greater understanding of problems involved in semantic change, particularly in pointing out transition areas where dialects become fused. In a study supplementary to that originally conducted by Harold B. Allen for the atlas of the upper midwest, Gary Underwood interviewed two generations of three farm families in rural South Dakota to determine if later generations have resolved any of the semantic confusion in that area. Data collected from the study show that when dialects fuse and there are two or more terms for the same referent (as with "comforter" and "quilt"), one term either drops out of use in the area (as with "fried cake" for "doughnut") or semantic fusion takes place with one term becoming a generic term ("quilt') and the other becoming a specific term ("comforter"). (JM)

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SEMANTIC FISSION THROUGH DIALECT FUSION

Presented at the American Dialect Society

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That the linguistic atlas projects have provided much information on the regional distribution of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax is well known. In addition, the collected data have been shown to provide important insights into several other aspects of language. Harold B. Allen first demonstrated how the data in the files of The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest provide "evidence for greater understanding of certain problems involved in semantic change."[1] In a paper supplementary to Allen's, Gary Underwood provided further evidence of confusion and ambiguity in the dialect patterns of the Upper Midwest.[2]

In an attempt to determine if later generations have resolved any of the semantic confusion in the Upper Midwest three farm families in the area around Crocker, South Dakota, were interviewed during the summers between 1971 and 1974. All six parents were typical Type I informants. They had each completed only an eighth-grade education, had lived in the Crocker area their entire lives with only brief outside visits, and were of an average age of sixty-five. At the time Allen was gathering his data for the Atlas files, this group of informants were approximately thirty-eight, about a generation younger than Allen's original Type I informants.

In addition to this group of Type I informants, a second group composed of ten of their children were also interviewed. This group was typical of Allen's Type III informants. They were all born in the Crocker area, were between the middle thirties and middle forties, and were graduated from or had attended college or university in South Dakota. While all of them have spent some time outside the state, the men in military service and the women

on short trips, the majority of their lives has been spent in the area around Crocker, and they identified themselves closely with the area. Because the factors of age and education were used to distinguish between Type I and Type III informants, it is not possible to attribute with absolute certainty the difference in usage between these two types of informants to either age or educational difference. However, these two groups compose over ten percent of the approximately 150 to 200 citizens within a ten mile radius of Crocker. Parents sixty and over are generally Type I informants and many of their children either are graduated from or at least attended some college or post-high school training. For these reasons, it seems likely that they represent a fairly accurate sample of the area.

The rural area around Crocker is an ideal area to study semantic change. It is situated in Clark County, close to where Allen drew the major isogloss bundle that separates the primary Midland-Northern differentiation as carried West by the population movement. More important, as Allen has stated, "the distinction [between Midland and Northern] is clearest in Iowa; it has so far broken down in South Dakota that the state might as well be designated a transition area. . . . The diffusion of many a dialect feature is so gradual that an isogloss cannot be drawn for it. Rather recourse must be had to percentage frequency."[3] Thus the analyses by Allen indicate that while for some words it is possible to extend Northern-Midland isoglosses across the region for many items that have regional distribution in the East, others are so widely disseminated in the Upper Midwest that is is impossible to draw isoglosses for them. In other words, there is a degree of dialect fusion taking place where the difference between variants is at best a percentage figure.

There were several factors that led to the breakdown of the Northern and Midland distinctions in the Upper Midwest. Probably the two most significant were the ready availability of the Mississippi River as a new avenue for northward movement and the fact that at the time Allen and his field workers were making their selection of communities, most of the Upper Midwest residents had parents who came from non-English-speaking countries. In fact, all of the Type I informants used in the present study had one or more parents born in a non-English-speaking country.

Because of the influx of both Northern and Midland speakers, as well as non-English-speaking immigrants, the second generation in each speech community in the Midwest could be expected to modify its pure dialect by borrowing terms from other dialects. The Northern speaker could be expected to borrow Midland terms and the Midland speaker could be expected to borrow Northern terms. Thus a new pattern, a fusion of Northern and Midland, should be expected. However, the Midwest is a large, diversified area, over 360,000 square miles, as well as being an artificially created administrative area, so that one should not assume that the type of fusion that takes place in Crocker is true for the entire area. It does, however, show in principle how some transition areas might fuse elements of competing dialects into a new secondary dialect area. I should also mention that in this Crocker study, as Gary Underwood demonstrated for the Upper Midwest as a whole, most vocabulary items are stable.[4]

While several types of semantic changes are occurring in the Crocker area, the most interesting one happens when two or more terms are applied to the same referent.[5] This process is common in a dialect transition area such

as Crocker. As one would expect, the competing terms either acquire different referents or one of them drops out. But a period of semantic confusion seems to occur when dialects first begin to fuse, before a term drops out or semantic modification occurs. This seems to be the process that is currently at work in the Crocker, South Dakota, area.

Among terms Allen discussed as having semantic confusion were the distinctions quilt / comforter, fry(ing) pan[6] / skillet / spider, and fried cake / doughnut.[7] Historically, the feature determining the choice quilt or comforter was found in the contrast between stitching and tying. A quilt was stitched or quilted and a comforter, because it was usually heavier, and thus more comfortable in the winter, was usually tied. By the time the data were being collected for The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest, a good deal of semantic confusion existed. Much of this resulted from the introduction of commercially-made bed coverings which are filled with a thick lining to provide comfort and are stitched instead of tied. Thus, it has a primary characteristic of a quilt because it is stitched and a primary characteristic of a comforter because it is thick and warm enough to provide winter comfort. Fifteen percent of all the informants interviewed by Allen and his field workers no longer made a distinction between these two types of bed coverings and used these terms interchangeably. Most of these informants were in Minnesota and North Dakota. Another twenty percent had given up and used only quilt. Only about thirty-two percent of these informants adhered to the etymological distinction by allowing the comforter to be tied in contrast with the quilt.

This trend has continued. In this Crocker study, all of the Type I in-

formants used the term quilt. In addition, sixty-seven percent also used the term comforter, but none of these informants made a distinction between the two terms on etymological grounds. Comforter was generally considered to be old-fashioned. As one informant said, "a comforter is what they used to make at a quilting bee." The others stated there was no difference between the terms. All of the Type III informants used only quilt. When asked about comforter, two of them responded that they had heard the term but didn't use it. One of these associated it with a quilt, and the other said that it was similar to an afghan, a crocheted or knitted covering often used while sitting around watching TV. From this, it appears that the generic term for this type of bedding has become quilt and no longer is a distinction being made between a stitched and a tied or a filled and an unfilled bed covering.

The semantic confusion involving the second set of terms that Allen reported also seems resolved. At the time the data for the Atlas were being collected, there were three names for the generic kitchen utensil in which eggs were fried. The most common one, frying pan with its variant fry pan, had no noticeable regional pattern. The other two terms are the Midland skillet and the New England and coastal South term spider. At that time, it seemed that skillet was expanding into the Northern dialect areas. Spider, even then, seemed on the wane. The present study indicates the trend toward the demise of spider has continued. Only thirty-three percent of the Type I informants knew the term, and they referred to it as old fashioned. None of the Type III informants remembered even hearing the term.

When the data were being gathered for the Atlas, skillet was becoming the generic term. It was "extending its semantic range [and] it has also

extended its regional range, for it has moved widely into the Northern speech areas of Minnesota and the Dakotas to the point of almost exceeding the frequency of generic frying pan."[8] This trend appears to have been reversed, at least in the Crocker area. Frying pan is still the generic for both Type I and Type III informants. For both types, one-hundred percent responded with frying pan. However, sixty-seven percent of the Type I informants gave skillet as an alternate, as compared to thirty percent of the Type III informants, all of whom gave it as an old-fashioned term. From this data, it appears that skillet is headed the way of spider. One probable reason for this change in usage for skillet is that at the time the records were being gathered for the Atlas electric skillet was the commercial term appearing in advertisements.[9] Today the same item is advertised as an electric frying pan.

The semantic confusion between the third set of referents, doughnut and fried cake, reported on by Allen also seems on its way to being resolved.[10] The Eastern term fried cake is no longer used, although thirty-three percent of the Type I informants were familiar with it. Those familiar with it all considered it old fashioned. None of the Type III informants were familiar with the term. What is interesting here is that a term has disappeared while its referent is still well-known. This interest is further heightened when one considers the semantic change occurring in what doughnut is being used to refer to. Two types of doughnuts are popular in Crocker. One is made of sweetened, unleavened dough and the other is usually larger and lighter. Both are cooked in deep fat. All of the Type I informants who used the term fried cake used it to refer only to the first, smaller type of doughnut, whereas they used the term doughnut as a generic term to refer to both types.

The Type III informants also used doughnut as a generic term. Both groups of informants used a second referent to distinguish between the two types of doughnuts. However, again there was some confusion among the Type I informants. While all of them used the term cake doughnut to refer to the smaller one, sixteen percent of them also used the term bread doughnut for the same type. For the larger of the two items, eighty-three percent used the term raised doughnut, sixteen percent used glazed doughnut, and sixteen percent used bread doughnut. Thus bread doughnut was used to refer to both types of doughnuts. This ambiguity did not exist in the responses from the Type III informants. All of them used cake doughnut to refer to the smaller one and raised doughnut to refer to the larger one.

The second major type of semantic change that is occurring in the Crocker area is exemplified by the terms for bread, the distinctions between play hookey / skip school, and the meanings associated with the variant pronunciations of /brɪtʃəz/ ~ /briʧəz/ and /krɪk/ ~ /krik/. The simplex term bread is the generic term used at the dinner table by all of the informants if only one type of bread is being served. However, for the Type I informants, bread made at home is distinguished from that which is purchased in town by three terms: homemade bread, the simplex bread, and sour dough bread. All but one use the term homemade bread. The one exception, who still bakes her family's bread every week, uses the simplex bread. Thirty-three percent use sour dough bread in addition to homemade bread. For bread purchased in town, eighty-three percent use boughten bread, sixteen percent baker's bread, and sixteen percent store bread. No distinction was made between terms as far as meanings were concerned. In contrast, homemade bread is the

only term used for the first variety of bread by the Type III informants. However, a semantic diffusion seems to be occurring in reference to bread purchased in town. Eighty percent of them have come to use boughten bread as a generic term for that which is purchased. For fifty percent of the informants, store bread has come to mean the type of bread produced in bulk in large bakeries such as Wonder Bread, and bakery bread has come to refer to the homemade types of bread that come from small bakeries--even if it is sold in a general food store.

In The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest, Allen found both played hookey and skipped school to be common terms in South Dakota. Played hookey appeared among sixty-four percent of the informants and skipped school occurred among forty-three percent of them. He found no evidence to suggest a trend toward or away from either played hookey or skipped school. He was correct in his analysis; both terms are very much in evidence. All of the Type I informants used played hookey and sixty-seven percent of them also used the term skipped school. For them, the terms seemed to be in free variation. None made a distinction between them. Both terms were also common among Type III informants. All of them used the term skipped school and eighty percent of them used played hookey. However, there is a difference in meaning. Skipping school is a quasi-legal excuse for missing school and is not a serious infraction of attendance rules. One skips school during "Skip Day" when school is unofficially dismissed or when one stays home during the planting or harvest to help work in the fields. Playing hookey, on the other hand, occurs when one starts to school and then changes his mind and goes fishing. This semantic distinction seems to be spreading over this farming area. The

same distinction was also given to me by a freshman in near-by Bradley High School.

Allen, in the Atlas, shows that while pants and trousers are common in the Upper Midwest, the older breeches feebly survives in South Dakota. What is interesting is that in the Crocker area this term has both the /britʃəz/ and /brItʃəz/ pronunciation. For the Type I informants, eighty-four percent pronounce the term /brItʃəz/ and thirty-six percent also pronounce it /britʃəz/, although the term itself is considered old fashioned. As one informant said, the only time he uses the term is "when you threaten a kid and tell him you're going to tan his /brItʃəz/." Among the Type I informants there was no semantic distinction associated with the two pronunciations.

Perhaps partly because of the aphorism just mentioned, Type III informants all know the term. However, seventy percent pronounce it /brItʃəz/. In addition, eighty percent of them also use /britʃəz/. However, for Type III informants /britʃəz/ has come to be used only to refer to a particular type of riding pants, and /brItʃəz/ is used as a generic term. This could possibly be the result of the spelling pronunciation becoming associated with the specific term and the generic term becoming associated with the threat of a spanking.

The last example is the diffusion that has occurred between the two different pronunciations of /krIk/ and /krik/. In his Word Geography of the Eastern United States,[11] Kurath mentioned that the dissemination is largely regional. Allen has mentioned that /krik/~/krIk/ is the most common designation for the term referring to running water that is smaller than a river. He found no significant unbalance in the Upper Midwest. This term also proved to be the most common in the Crocker area. Among the Type I informants, eighty-three

percent used /krIk/, sixty-seven percent /krik/, thirty-three percent stream, and sixteen percent run. The Type I informants made no distinction between the meanings of the two pronunciations of creek. Most of them felt one was probably the correct pronunciation, but they were not sure. As one of them said, "It all depends upon who the school teacher was." None of the Type III informants used run, but they used the other two terms. All of them used the /krIk/~/krik/ variant, and thirty percent of them used stream. However, for them there was a distinction between /krIk/ and /krik/. /Krik/ seemed to be the more general term. For seventy percent of them a /krIk/ runs dry after the spring rains. For twenty percent, "a /krIk/ runs down a draw, but doesn't run on the flat." The definition for these twenty percent is quite close to that of the other seventy percent. A draw is the most common term in South Dakota for a small depression with a usually dry water course.

It is difficult to account for the semantic diffusion in the speech of the Type III informants. It possibly could be the result of a generation difference, or it could possibly be the result of more schooling, or a combination of both. It might simply be the result of wider travel in the world. However, even though their parents did not use /krik/~/krIk/ to mean running water that goes dry, there were South Dakota informants in The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest that did. Allen, in the comment section for coulee, mentions three informants that spoke of a creek as "running part of the time." Two were recorded by him and one was recorded by Wilson. The term dry creek was also recorded three times. This evidence suggests the possibility that the last example of semantic fission might

extend beyond the immediate Crocker area. It might result from the shortening of dry creek to creek.

While the analyses done in this paper are tentative and apply only to the area around Crocker, they do seem to support two conclusions:

1) The various linguistic atlas projects provide important evidence for the study of semantic change, particularly in pointing out transition areas where dialects become fused.

2) When dialects fuse and there are two or more terms for the same referent, a period of semantic confusion exists. Then, because it is a human characteristic to try to make sense out of confusion, one term either drops out of use in the area, such as fried cake did in the Crocker area, or semantic fission takes place in which one referent usually becomes a generic term such as /krik/ while the other becomes a specific term such as /krIk/.

Footnotes

1) Harold B. Allen, "Semantic Confusion: A Report from Atlas Files," PADS, No. 33, 1960, p. 3.

2) Gary N. Underwood, "Semantic Confusion: Evidence from the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest," Journal of English Linguistics, Vol. 2, 1968.

3) Harold B. Allen, "Primary Dialect Areas of the Upper Midwest," in Readings in Applied Linguistics, 2nd ed., ed. Harold B. Allen (New York, 1964), p. 27.

4) Gary N. Underwood, "Vocabulary Change in the Upper Midwest," PADS, No. 49, 1968, p. 9.

5) Some terms such as whiffletree and jag were not known by the Type III informants, but they will not be discussed here because they are not within the scope of this paper.

6) Fry pan is treated as a variant of frying pan here because only lexical entries are being examined. Two Type I informants used the variant fry pan, but both of them also used frying pan.

7) See "Semantic Confusion: A Report from the Atlas Files."

8) Harold E. Allen, The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest, Vol. I (Minneapolis, 1973), p. 199.

9) Ibid

10) See "Semantic Confusion: A Report from the Atlas Files."

11) Hans Kurath, A Word Geography of the Eastern United States (Ann Arbor) 1967.